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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the meaning of communication and how changes in methods of communication are creating new classroom tools and educational techniques. The inquiry hypothesis is reviewed in terms of its four component elements which suggest relationships between learning and how people communicate. (1) Curiosity is the force that impels the prospective learner to certain encounters with new facts or experiences rather than to alternative encounters which are also available. (2) Motivation, which propels and defines inquiry, is based on the medium of the encounter, nature of the phenomena being encountered, and the total environment in which the encounter occurs. (3) The focus of the inquiry, how the inquirer articulates what he wants to know, is usually expressed verbally. (4) The inquirer's total life experience which is brought to the encounter gives it particular meaning different from that which other inquirers would experience. Because the inquiry hypothesis implies that learning is an individual act, it requires new ways of looking at communication which have equal applicability to the teaching/learning relationship in any situation. The author discusses the need for history teachers to be more responsive to current problems and students' backgrounds; recognize television's role as a teaching/learning medium; involve students in "doing" history, for example, recording family history; pay attention to changing conditions of education and its institutions; and develop better communication among history educators. (Author/AV)

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Paper by Richard H. Brown
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HISTORY TEACHING/LEARNING AND THE COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION

Historians are in the business of communication, but we approach the word with a good deal of nervousness. Particularly when it comes to history education and what we do in our classrooms, we too often trivialize it. We equate communication simply with media, thinking of it in terms of whether we use slides and film and whether we have crossed the sound barrier. We see no changes in the roles of teacher and learner, no changes in our message. All that changes is how A passes the message on to B. By defining the word in this way, we overlook the significance of the fact that all around us change in methods and styles of communication are making clear that communication has to do with the total environment of human encounters, with the human psyche and human relationships, and with the roles we play. This new sense of what communication is all about not only gives rise to new tools for use in our classrooms, but also presents the possibility of transforming the classroom altogether, perhaps even eliminating it.

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Because we trivialize the word communication, we have, it seems to me, missed much of the significance of the thinking about learning that has been taking place in our own and other professions in the past decade. In the course of this thinking we have rediscovered John Dewey, exhausted a great deal of rhetoric, and begun -- though only barely begun -- to ask ourselves significant questions about what learning means for us, for the way we lead both our personal and professional lives, and for what we do in classrooms in the name of history education. Perhaps the prime example of this thinking is the hypothesis as to how people learn that

has come to be known as the inquiry hypothesis. It has given rise to much of the curriculum work of the past decade, and has contributed to much new thinking about education and educational institutions. It is worth reviewing with the question of communication in mind.

Put most succinctly, the inquiry hypothesis holds that learning is most effective when students perform in some fashion as inquirers, rather than when they are asked merely to master passively the conclusions of others. But it is the component elements of the so-called act of inquiry which tell us the most about learning and suggest its relationship to how we communicate. It seems to me that in the past decade we have identified at least four of these components. For want of better terminology they may be called curiosity, motivation, focus, and experience.

Curiosity, as the term is used in this hypothesis, refers to whatever it is that impels the prospective learner's encounter with any new fact, phenomenon, or experience. It is what impels him to a particular encounter rather than to a host of alternative encounters continuously available to him. It grows out of the learner's sense that that encounter will somehow be relevant to him; that it will teach him something that he wants or needs to know, that it will enable him in some fashion to grow as a human being or to increase his powers, or that it will in some other way be satisfying or worthwhile to him. What will be relevant to him does not necessarily have anything to do with the relevance of the phenomena to be encountered to the solution of social problems: he may be less curious about what we call current events than about a host of other matters. Nor will he necessarily measure what is relevant in strictly utilitarian terms of knowledge or power: he may be impelled solely by what he expects to be in some sense pleasurable.

What he will find satisfying either in utilitarian or pleasurable terms has

to do with who he is, what he knows, where he is in time and place and in the course of life. These vary with each of us. The things I am curious about, for example, include Martin Van Buren, the Chicago Cubs, and the question of how people learn. Knowing something about these subjects, it satisfies me for a variety of reasons to learn more -- and in addition I have a conceptual apparatus that makes it easy for me to learn more. I am a sucker for anybody who comes along with something to tell me about any of them. I am also potentially curious about a number of other things about which I know nothing, if but only if I apprehend them in suitable fashion: if the medium is one that I can use, and if the conceptual tools that I already possess are in some way applicable to the new subject so that I have some way of getting a handle on it.

If the curiosity that impels the encounter is the first definable component of inquiry, the motivation that propels and defines it is clearly the second. Motivation has to do with all the stimulae that affect an encounter once it is initiated, including the medium or media through which it is transacted, the nature of the phenomena being encountered, and the total environment in which the encounter takes place. Motivation does not depend upon whether an inquirer is curious but on whether he feels free to engage his curiosity in a particular encounter. I may be enormously curious about the Cubs, for example, but if new information about them is offered to me in Russian, which I don't understand, I will not be motivated to learn. If it comes to me in some form of English which sounds foreign to my ears, I may hear it, but imperfectly. In like manner if the information comes from a source which has provided faulty information about the Cubs in the past, my motivation to learn will be lessened. And, if the information comes to me in surroundings that I innately distrust, I am likely to distrust the information itself or to be less interested in it.

A third component of the act of inquiry is the focus that shapes the inquiry:

how it is that the inquirer organizes and articulates what he is curious about, or what he wants to know; how he organizes his own consciousness of the encounter. This will most frequently be through words, the verbal symbols in which we all think. It may take the form of a question, but more often it takes the form of a hypothesis, a positive assertion of something that we think is true even though we know that it may not be and that we may subsequently change it. Obviously the focus we give our inquiry colors what it is we see and learn, singling out particular aspects of the encounter, while keeping us from seeing things that may loom much larger in the eyes of others, perhaps even to the person who is the source of the encounter. Our focus may also be such as to betray the fact that we are really more interested in the encounter itself than we are in the alleged message of the encounter: that what we really are testing out, for example, is the medium. Thus I may ask someone something about the Cubs that I am not really interested in knowing, when what I really want to learn is whether the person is interested in baseball, or, if he is a stranger at my corner bar, whether he speaks English.

The fourth component of inquiry, which colors all the rest, is the experience the inquirer brings to the encounter. It is this that gives the encounter whatever meaning it may have in his life. It is this that defines for each individual inquirer what he will be curious about and why, what will and will not motivate him, how he will focus his inquiry. The experience the inquirer brings to the encounter is his total life experience to date: his sex and race, what he has been through, his personal affairs both large and small, what he sees and does, the words he uses and what he means by them. All of these things define what learning psychologists call his cognitive map, what J.H. Hexter, in his challenging book The History Primer, calls his "second record". They determine what the inquirer is aware of and what he is sensitive to, and they enable him to hear some things

and not others. For all of us the map is different. Each of you in this room is at this moment tuning in and out what I say according to your own experience. You hear some sentences and not others, and each person is hearing different sentences. While everything I say has meaning for me, your varied experiences enable each of you to hear some things and not others. Some words I use have meaning to you, while others do not. Some ideas square sufficiently with your own experiences that you hear them whether you agree or not, while with others the disjuncture between our two experiences is so great that you fail to hear them entirely. So it is, constantly, in our communication with each other, whether one-to-one or in large groups. So it is in our encounters with any new fact, phenomena, or experience from which potentially we might learn.

Our experience affects what we will be most curious about because it defines who we are, where we are in time and place, what we know, and what we want and need. Similarly our experience affects our use of media, what associations each conveys, what words mean and don't mean. And our experience affects the focus we bring to each new encounter, the hypotheses we make, how we express them, what we mean by them.

At its heart the inquiry hypothesis holds that learning is an individual act, even when carried on in the social context of a classroom; that it results from something the learner does rather than from something that is done to him; and that it is the product of an encounter governed not only by the fact or phenomenon to be encountered but also by the total experience which the prospective learner brings to the encounter, by the medium of the encounter, and by the total environment in which the encounter takes place. In pursuing this hypothesis as to how people learn, we have discovered in it a far more radical message than many expected. It stands our traditional view of the world of education in its head. It shifts the focus from what we teach and how we teach it to how and what

students learn. It bids us recognize that these are not necessarily the same thing or even opposite sides of the same coin. It renders archaic our traditional hierarchical view of the world of education -- our view of schools and colleges as organized from the top down for the convenience of administrators and teachers with the students as objects to be manipulated. It renders anachronistic our view that knowledge can realistically be pictured as an abstract entity to be "covered", as something that trickles down from the scholar to the teacher and the textbook writer, and from them on down to the student. Because it breaks down these old assumptions of a formal and hierarchical order underlying our education system, the message recasts the traditional view of the separate roles of teachers and learners, suggesting instead the mutuality of the enterprise, that there is no teaching unless there is learning and that every learner is also a teacher in that his presence affects the total environment of the encounter, its medium, and its purposes. For this reason the message suggests that curriculum is best and most logically made in each classroom, ideally with each individual student, a suggestion which has helped to carry us to the idea of the open class room. It suggests the inextricable connection between what students do inside classrooms and what they do outside -- a suggestion which is leading to experiments in schools without walls, in open universities, and in experiential learning through social and community action and through travel.

Paradoxically, while we have discovered the inherent radicalism of such new ways of looking at learning, it seems to me that we have begun to realize, however grudgingly, that what lies at the heart of the inquiry hypothesis is not a new method of teaching but rather some new ways of looking at communication which have equal applicability to the teaching/learning relationship in any situation, traditional or not. What people learn and the quality of their learning is affected by the components of their inquiry in any encounter, whether in a lecture

or a discussion group, in an orthodox classroom or an experimental one, in school or out. Thus, for example, the inquiry hypothesis as to how people learn in no way precludes my lecturing to you as I am doing, but it does suggest that I have little right to expect that you are necessarily hearing what I am saying, and even less right to be certain what it is that you are learning from what you hear. For that will depend on why you came to this session; on what hypothesis about the subject you bring to hearing me -- if, indeed, you are hearing me at all; on whether the words I use have meaning to you, and if they do, what they mean; on what you know about the subject; and on a host of similar factors that have to do primarily with you and only secondarily with me. So it is with teaching/learning in our own classrooms. The student who comes to each classroom encounter basically to find out what we want him to know or do in order to pass the course and get a credit is inquiring into something quite significantly different from the student who comes because he is fascinated by the character of Andrew Jackson or is exploring for use in his own life the question of whether to be civilly disobedient. The student whose temperament and skills are such that he enjoys the give and take of a good discussion will get something quite different out of a discussion from the student who has little regard for his peers or little skill in articulating his ideas or listening to others. The student whose experience leads him to view school and college classrooms simply as places to exercise well-learned skills of survival will have a difficult time approaching in any other way anything that goes on in any particular classroom, no matter how good the class may be.

The implications for the history profession of these new ways of looking at the teaching/learning relationship are enormous. In the first place they call obviously for greater responsiveness on all our parts to the problems of the day, to the questions our students are asking, and to the life experiences they bring to those questions. These implications underscore the validity of the idea that

the search for a usable past is a highly legitimate use of history, perhaps the most legitimate one. They tell us why it is that courses designed to do that -- in women's history and local history, in black history and Indian history and in the history of other ethnic groups -- are among the few bright spots in an otherwise grim picture of declining history enrollments and declining student interest. They suggest the importance of being able to develop quickly both trained professionals and effective materials for study in new areas, of being responsive to the new questions that will be raised in these areas, and of being able to develop the apparatus to provide support. The study of the history of the American Indian, for example, is likely to raise anew basic questions about the legitimate materials of history study, about whether history must be written to be valid, and about the relationship between history and recorded time. These are questions we shall be able to consider only if our journals and our curricular offerings bring them quickly to our attention rather than shutting them off as the peculiar problems of a sub-field of historical study, and as problems that have to do only with scholarship and not with teaching. Among other things, as a second example, we are as a profession developing new archives and new types of archives that we need to be able to draw on immediately in our classrooms. The oral history archives that dot the country are one illustration. A second, typical of many others, is a rich archive of materials out in the Berkeley hills on the women's movement. Known as the Women's History Research Center, it has been assembled by a dedicated group of people who are asking new questions about historical experience and about the perspectives from which we see it. These archives suffer from lack of support. We do not know how to use them except in traditional ways that would put their products years away from getting to our classrooms, and that would be likely to have transformed them in nature and in style before they do get there. We ought to be as concerned about these archives for history education as we are

about the Roosevelt Library and the National Archives for our scholarship.

Secondly, whether we like it or not, after a mere quarter of a century of television we are probably already in an age when most people get more of what they know about history from television than they do from books or from our classrooms. It can be argued that already more of our citizens draw their sense of the national past from Alistair Cook's brilliant series on America than ever drew it from Morison and Commager or any of their successors. In our profession we are not geared up to recognize this reality. Nowhere in our classrooms do we train people to see critically with anything approaching the rigor that we use in teaching them to read critically. Only rarely do our courses recognize that visual media do more than supplement our written past: that they open up a whole new past for us and wholly new ways of apprehending it. If we continue to insist that the primary mission of our graduate schools is to train people to write books and teach in classrooms we may be fighting a losing battle for professional survival or at best a battle in which even victory will bring us diminished significance as a profession, and a diminished role in society. At the very least we are committing ourselves to a smaller and smaller share of the learning market. It may well be that we should be training as many of our graduate students for work in television and other media as we do for work in classrooms.

Thirdly, we need to find ways of paying greater attention in our teaching/learning to the techniques of doing history and of involving students in the doing. If there is a validity to the idea that the medium is the message, then history that comes at students as a bag of facts, conclusions, and interpretations to be mastered or "covered" will be seen as a fixed and closed body of knowledge; history that comes at them most often in writing and usually in the garb of academic language will be seen as linear and academic, and history that comes at them with no apparent purpose other than to fill classroom hours and provide educational

hurdles over which to jump will be seen at best as make-work and at worst as an instrument of oppression. We need to ask ourselves if this is the way we want history to be seen. Or do we want people to see it as something they draw on in their daily lives, that they actually do themselves a hundred times a day, the tools of which they draw on constantly to inform the minutest of decisions, in essence as something that can tell them more about themselves?

If history is to be seen as something that one does and that one uses, then we must involve students in the doing of it. Surely another of the rare vital areas in history education today is family history, courses that frequently involve students in exploring first their own history and their family's history, and in interviewing family members and using the techniques of oral history. What makes this approach as successful as it appears to be is not only the obvious filip it gives to curiosity, but what it does for motivation as well by giving learners the opportunity to encounter history through a medium other than the written word, from a source other than an official document, and in a setting other than the school or college library. Our profession would stand to benefit in many respects if we paid more attention to what oral historians are doing and how they work, and if we recognized that people in our various oral history projects are doing more than prepare a new type of document for future use -- that they are, in fact, doing history as they create these documents. Beyond the tape recorder and the cassette, another tool already in our midst, though still in its infancy, is cable television. Many predict that this tool will ultimately transform all our institutions, certainly all our education. Up to now television, for all its great impact, has been largely an instrument of one-way communication, available to most of us only while sitting on our backsides. We have been able to take it or leave it, learn from it, and be affected by it, but we have not been able to use it ourselves or to communicate through its use. Now all that will change. As

history educators, we should already be paying some attention to the prodigious consequences which will result from this technological development.

Which brings us to the fourth point -- the need to give more effective, coherent, and imaginative attention to the changing conditions of education, and to the changing nature of the institutions in which we teach. The Alternative School movement is burgeoning on all sides, with the establishment of schools-within-schools or schools-outside-of-schools, schools that are free from the lock-step of traditional curricula and free from the rigidities of traditional departmental organization. The National Association of Secondary School Principals estimates that there are now 3,000 of these schools throughout the country at the elementary and secondary levels. One projection indicates that by 1976 their numbers will be close to 20,000. They have their equivalents at the college level as para-colleges, and colleges within colleges, or within universities. Whereas once many saw these as models, more now find them to be refuges; but all signs suggest that they are not likely to decline. They are not panaceas. In them people are struggling toward more effective ways of teaching and learning, woefully short of training and tools, particularly tools for analyzing learning and human growth on which they can make decisions about how to move from point A to point B -- or even what point A and point B are. As a profession, we are too little accustomed to analyzing or even thinking about the intended educational outcomes of history study to offer much help along these lines: we are too much in the habit of making decisions about sequence on the basis of chapter two following chapter one, or on the basis of the history narrative, the "It's the Civil War, it must be January" syndrome.

Related to the search for alternative types of institutions is the growing interest in experiential education and in changing institutional arrangements to provide for this, such as Open Universities and so-called Schools-without-Walls. Students are going off to Europe to visit the great cathedrals. In Boston an

organization called Campus Free College channels college students into profitable experiences and lines them up with mentors around the world. We know little about how to plan for such modes of learning in history, less about how to evaluate such experiences in order to fit them into anything else we are doing.

Finally, the needs for greater responsiveness to changing student and professional interests and to a rapidly changing education scene suggest the urgent need for new forms of communication among ourselves. This need is as great for our work in traditional classrooms as it is for any work we might do in new settings. At present there are no ways of finding out about new or experimental materials except through the marketing apparatus of commercial publishers, which carry information only about published materials and thus not about those that are the most experimental or current. There are no ways of sharing the experience of those who are engaged in curricular experiments or who are giving new courses or experimenting with new ways of teaching and learning in new or altered educational environments except for occasional papers at conventions or those reported in articles that happen to be chosen for publication by the very few journals interested in history education, such as The History Teacher and Social Education. There is no place to look to know what is happening in history education across the country, even in traditional courses and in traditional settings; no place to go for reliable statistics let alone analysis; no forum for discussion of problems or issues; no way of collectively and as a profession reconceptualizing our courses and what we do. There is no place to look for barometric reports on students, student interests, and student language that would help us understand the learners with whom we deal, even in the most traditional of courses. There is no place to go for help in solving problems encountered in using media other than those in which we have been trained in the schools to which we went; no place to go for information about how new forms of communication technology might be used in history classrooms

or in the pursuit of history outside those classrooms. There is no way of getting access to tools that would help people in developing new courses or in establishing new types of educational experiences for students, such as curriculum or interaction analysis systems, in-service teacher training programs, consultant help, political and professional help, or information about where to look for funding.

At present a proposal for an access network and periodical that would seek to meet some of the particular needs delineated here is before a number of private foundations. The related Network and Periodical would bear the name Access to History, suggesting its intent to give those who use history in educational pursuits, students and teachers alike, more effective and immediate access to the discipline and to the tools they need to make it responsive. The enterprise will be sponsored jointly by the American Historical Association and the Newberry Library. If funded, it will get under way this coming year, hopefully with the support and active participation of as many people in this room and throughout the profession as can be enlisted.

Ultimately such a communication system, if it is to make any difference in the way we lead our lives, must exemplify the conviction that at least in some important sense history is something that all of us do; that it has meaning only as it helps people grow and leaves them better able to understand themselves and the world around them; and that communication and the way we communicate has at least as much to tell us about the way we apprehend and use the past and how we define it as it does about any other facet of our existence. Only as we come to recognize these things and explore their consequences will we as historians have much hope of playing any very significant role in the enormously exciting worlds of education and communication that lie ahead.